

Religion and Reality: Victorian society as seen through art and poetry

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***Abstract:** Christianity was an essential part of life for Victorians in all strata of society. The numbers and sizes of Victorian churches that can be seen in our towns and cities today is a testament to the numbers that attended church in that era. This article analyses two works with different themes within the Victorian Christian tradition as represented by William Holman Hunt's painting *The Festival of St Swithin (The Dovecot)* (1866) and Algernon Charles Swinburne's poem *Benediction* (1893). Holman Hunt's painting is a visual expression of Tractarianism, a theological debate discussed in the first part of the nineteenth century amongst theologians in Oxford. *The Dovecot* is an allegory that details the critical points of reform that the Tractarians wanted to introduce into the Church of England. By contrast, Swinburne's *Benediction* is a roundel poem popular among the more ordinary churchgoers. The death of children was more common in Victorian society than it is today, and many parents would have struggled to come to terms with losing a young life. The poem may have helped people through the grieving process. These two works open a window on religion and reality in Victorian society, and their relevance in modern society is assessed.*

The era that we now describe as 'Victorian' was a period of tremendous change in the United Kingdom.¹ These changes did not affect everyone in society in the same way. One example that had a significant impact on academics, theologians, and the Church of England was the Catholic Emancipation Act 1829, which freed Roman Catholics from earlier restrictions on participation in public life and enabled them to practice their faith openly.² This reform coincided with the Government publishing proposals to reform the Church of Ireland, the whole of Ireland being part of the

¹ Charles Wilson, 'Economy and Society in Late Victorian Britain', *The Economic History Review*, New Series, 18, 1, (1965), 183-198 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2591881>> [accessed 23 January 2022] (183-183).

² Marjorie Bloy, 'Catholic Emancipation', <www.historyhome.co.uk> [accessed 9 September 2021].

United Kingdom.³ Factions within the Church of England viewed these changes as unwarranted political interference in affairs strictly within the Church's control. They thought this would further diminish the Church of England when it would become 'one sect amongst many'.⁴ Several fellows at Oriel College reacted by proposing in a series of tracts that the Church should adopt a position as exemplified by the Medieval Church by establishing an 'organic, hierarchical and paternalistic society', and in so doing, protect the Church's role in society.⁵ These individuals gained the collective name of 'Tractarians'. This yearning for earlier and, perhaps, simpler times might be described today as a romantic and even sentimental view of the Medieval period. However, it found a resonance in the Church that ultimately led to adopting aspects of pre-Reformation traditions within the Anglican rites of the Church of England. The focus on religious debate inspired some artists and writers to think about religious symbolism in art. The Pre-Raphaelites are associated with this type of symbolism, even though Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the movement's leader, was a self-acknowledged atheist.⁶ This paper will look at two works associated with the Pre-Raphaelites, the painting commonly known as *The Dovecot* and the poem *Benediction*. These works both have a religious theme, they are from similar periods, and they share a typical Victorian veneer of sentimentality to carry their message.

William Holman Hunt (1827-1910) 'tried to find pictorial solutions to Christianity's relation to its Judaic roots', and indeed, its pre-Reformation identity.⁷ One of Holman Hunt's late paintings associated with the Tractarians was *The Festival of St Swithin (The Dovecot)*, (Figure 1). He initially

³ Robert P. H. Mermagen, 'The Established Church in England and Ireland: Principles of Church Reform', *Journal of British Studies*, 3 (1964), 144-151 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/175341>> [accessed 23 January 2022], p. 144.

⁴ Unknown, 'What was the Oxford Movement?', *Pusey House* <<http://www.puseyhouse.org.uk/what-was-the-oxford-movement.html>> [accessed 9 September 2021].

⁵ Joseph Cronin, 'The Medievalism of the Oxford Movement', *Reinvention: a Journal of Undergraduate Research*, 3.2 (2010) <<http://www.warwick.ac.uk/go/reinventionjournal/issues/volume3issue2/cronin>> [accessed 9 September 2021].

⁶ Alastair Grieve, 'The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and the Anglican High Church', *The Burlington Magazine*, 111 (1969), 292-295 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/875938>> [accessed 23 January 2022], p. 294.

⁷ Albert Boime, 'William Holman Hunt's "The Scapegoat": Rite of Forgiveness/Transference of Blame', *The Art Bulletin* 84 (2002), 94-114 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3177254>> [accessed 23 January 2022], p. 94.

prepared this work as a sketch for his sister Emily, although he completed it himself.⁸ The foreground shows the top part of a dovecot with a dove sitting dejectedly on the roof in the rain, and seven other birds are sheltering in various parts of the structure. The doves all have very different plumages and poses. The finely painted background has multiple buildings and trees, with a vegetable garden in the lower left; this was the view from Holman Hunt's house in Kensington.⁹ The sky is overcast, and there is a real sense of storm clouds rolling across with just a hint of better weather coming from the top right-hand side. The work's title, *The Festival of St Swithin*, has ancient connotations. This Medieval saint was a little known Anglo-Saxon Bishop of Winchester. His feast day was 15 July, and according to legend, if it rains on St Swithin's day, it will rain for forty days afterwards.¹⁰ Looking at the elements of this painting, it is an allegory of religion, particularly Tractarianism. Further evidence for this view is that Thomas Combe (1796-1872), the Superintendent of the Clarendon Press in Oxford, bought the work from Holman Hunt and owned several other paintings with Tractarian connections and meanings.¹¹

When considering the secondary title of this painting, *The Dovecot*, this is a straightforward, albeit sentimental, representation of doves sheltering from the rain. When, however, the primary title, *The Feast of St Swithin*, is taken into account, the viewer might think about the painting's religious context. The first religious allusion is to Luke, 12.6, 'Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings, and not one of them is forgotten before God?'.¹² This verse says that all creatures, even the humble sparrow or dove, is meaningful to God. The second religious connection comes from interpreting the work as an allegory, a symbolic narrative.¹³ Now, the doves represent the faithful, not forgotten by God, sheltering in the Ark, or dovecot, from the storm affecting the Church.

⁸ Unknown, *The Festival of St Swithin (The Dovecot)*, gallery label (Oxford: The Ashmolean Museum, 2019).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Editors, 'St. Swithin's Day', *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 30 April 2020 <<https://britannica.com/topic/Saint-Swithin-Day>> [accessed 23 January 2021].

¹¹ James McMullen Rigg, 'Combe, Thomas Colin', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2019 <<https://ez-proxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2102/10.1093/ref.odnb/6021>> [accessed 23 January 2022]

¹² Various, *The Authorized (King James) Holy Bible* (Cambridge: The Cambridge University Press, Standard Text Edition, no publication date), p. 1028.

¹³ Erika Langmuir and Norbert Lynton, 'Allegory', in *The Yale Dictionary of Art and Artists* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 15-16.



Figure 1. *The Festival of St Swithin, (The Dovecot)*, (1866), William Holman Hunt (1827-1910), 73 x 91 cm, oil on canvas, The Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, UK, © The Ashmolean Museum, (reproduced with permission).

The storm in Tractarian terms was the Reformation that destroyed the traditional relationship between the Medieval Church and the worshipper. The lightness developing in the sky shows that the weather may be beginning to clear, and better times are coming. The clearing storm shows that the Reformation can be overturned, and services returned to the rites of pre-Reformation times. Hence, the painting symbolises the hope of better times for the Tractarians.¹⁴ The vegetable garden shows a more straightforward, self-sufficient way of life which the Tractarians espoused. While the castle tower seen on the skyline stands for the Medieval world, all of which reflect Cronin's analysis of the Tractarians' organic, hierarchical and paternalistic world.

Working-class people had more practical problems to deal with that arose from their everyday life rather than thinking about theological discussions taking place in Oxford about the Church of England. The growth of Britain's overseas empire helped fuel an industrial revolution that needed

¹⁴ Langmuir and Lynton, pp. 15-16.

a ready labour supply, and relatively high wage levels encouraged people to move from the countryside into the rapidly expanding cities.¹⁵ These urban areas provided employment security for many despite dreadful working conditions such as those described by Charles Dickens in *Oliver Twist* published in 1838. Migration, however, was not the only reason cities grew. The population of England and Wales more than doubled, rising from 15,914,148 to 32,527,843 people between 1841 and 1901, partly because the migrants moving into the cities tended to be younger people who formed relationships and started families.¹⁶ A negative impact of the growing towns was building what we would now call slum housing associated with overcrowding and inadequate sanitation that led to poor outcomes in life expectancy.¹⁷ A high death rate was particularly evident amongst infants, where up to one in five children born in the new industrial towns died before one year.¹⁸ The majority of these deaths, and adult deaths, took place at home rather than in institutions, as happens today.¹⁹ The deceased's body would be laid out and remain in the house until the funeral, usually held on a Sunday.²⁰ The reality of the death of children affected many families, and most would have turned to their neighbours and the local church for support. However, grieving parents might have needed more than this, for as the radical essayist Leigh Hunt wrote, 'There are griefs so gentle in their very nature that it would be worse than false heroism to refuse them a tear. Of this kind are the deaths of infants'.²¹ So, people might also have found solace in the popular poetry of the period, which directly addressed the situation that they were facing.

¹⁵ J. A. Banks, 'Population Change and the Victorian City', *Victorian Studies*, 11 (1968), 277-289 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3825147>> [accessed 23 January 2022], p. 277.

¹⁶ Banks, p. 277.

¹⁷ Banks, quoting G. Kitson Clark, p. 279.

¹⁸ Naomi Williams and Chris Galley, 'Urban-rural Differentials in Infant mortality in Victorian England', *Population Studies*, 49 (1995), p. 407 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2175255>> [accessed 9 September 2021].

¹⁹ James Walvin, 'Celebrations of Death in Victorian England', *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques*, (1982), 356 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/41298792>> [accessed 24 January 2022].

²⁰ Walvin, p. 356.

²¹ J. H. Leigh Hunt, 'Deaths of Little Children' in *English Essays: Sidney to Macaulay*, 27 (New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1909-14) <bartleby.com/harvardclassics> [accessed 24 January 2022].

Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837-1909) was a lyric poet of the Victorian era and, like Holman Hunt, was a member of the Pre-Raphaelite set.²² Swinburne is better known today for his *Poems and Ballads* published in 1866.²³ Although it escaped prosecution, contemporary critics widely regarded this volume as obscene.²⁴ In 1893, Swinburne wrote a less controversial poem, *Benediction*.

Blest in death and life beyond man's guessing
Little children live and die, possest
Still of grace that keeps them past expressing
Blest.

Each least chirp that rings from every nest,
Each least touch of flower-soft fingers pressing
Aught that yearns and trembles to be prest,

Each least glance gives gifts of grace, redressing.
Grief's worst wrongs: each mother's nurturing breast
Feeds a flower of bliss, beyond all blessing
Blest.²⁵

This poem is in the style of a roundel. This format was introduced in its modern form by Swinburne in *A Century of Roundels*, published in 1883.²⁶ Swinburne had taken as his starting point a traditional *rondeau* or *rondel*, as it appears in French medieval literature as a fixed verse form suitable 'for light verse, not serious poetry'.²⁷ He considered that the fixed form helped distinguish strong poets from weak poets as ingenuity was needed to follow the fixed structure.²⁸ Adam Mazel particularly notes, taking quotes from the introduction to the *Century of Roundels*, that part of Swin-

²² Rikky Rooksby, 'Swinburne, Algernon Charles', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2009 <<https://ez-proxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2102/10.1093/ref:odnb/36389>> [accessed 24 January 2022].

²³ Rooksby.

²⁴ Rooksby.

²⁵ Algernon Charles Swinburne, 'Benediction', (2011) <www.poetry.com/algernoncharlesswinburne/benediction> [accessed 15 December 2021].

²⁶ Roland Green, 'Roundel', *The Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. by Roland Green, 4th edn (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017) <<https://www.ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/roundel>> [accessed 24 January 2022], p.1226

²⁷ Adam Mazel, 'The Ends of Rhyme: Swinburne's A Century of Roundels and Late-Victorian Rhyme Culture', *Victorian Poetry*, 55 (2017), 163-187 <<https://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2713/login.aspx?direct=true&d-b=aft&AN=125284721&site=e-host-live>> [accessed 25 January 2022], p. 165.

²⁸ Mazel, p. 166.

burne's innovation was to use the roundel as a tool 'for not only "sportive or amatory incident" but also pathos and "mourning"'.²⁹ Swinburne's roundels are three stanzas, with eleven lines in total, one of which is shorter and repeats as a refrain.³⁰ *Benediction* follows this pattern. Stanzas one and three comprise four lines, while the middle stanza has three lines. Lines A and C of the first and last stanzas, and line B of the middle stanza, rhyme through repetition of 'guessing', 'expressing', 'pressing' and so on. The other lines are connected by 'possest', 'blest', 'nest', 'prest', 'breast', ending with an emphatic 'blest'. This format gives a repetitive rhythm to the poem that Maze describes as audible and visual.³¹ So, in *Benediction*, the ending of each line sets a rhythm for the poet's voice that is repeated visually in the poem's appearance on paper

In *Benediction*, Swinburne likens children to young birds in the nest. The image evokes a strong impression of innocence and helplessness as in both cases, the young are entirely dependent on their parents. The analogy also links back to the quotation from Luke referred to earlier. Luke says the sparrow, a small bird, perhaps insignificant in the greater scheme of nature, is significant to God, so are the youngest and smallest of children, even if their life on earth is brief. Swinburne emphasises in the first stanza that the innocence of the young allows them to carry a grace beyond death that makes them blessed. The second stanza connects the parent to the physical memory of the child's brief life. The chirping of the young bird is a romantic interpretation of the cries of a baby, and the softness of a baby's tiny fingers recalls the parental urge to caress their infant's hand. The final stanza reminds the reader that the inherent blessing of the grace of the young child could help soothe the grief of the parent. The idea of this roundel emphasising bestowing a blessing reinforces its title *Benediction*. A benediction is a blessing given by a priest to the congregation at the end of a religious service. The mother, in particular, has helped nurture the flower that was the child and bring the child to a state of bliss that will be its blessing in heaven. These words carry a heavy burden of sentiment that is perhaps not to modern taste, even though the death of a child

²⁹ Mazel, p. 165.

³⁰ Green, p. 1226.

³¹ Mazel, p. 166.

remains one of the worst experiences in anyone's life. The sentimental tone in the poem may serve a valuable purpose of focussing on grief that, as Leigh Hunt describes, may help bring the tears that help the parents through the grieving process.

These two works have several features in common. The first is that they are sentimental pieces that engage the audience's emotions at a basic level, typically triggering feelings that Marcia Mueller Eaton describes as innocence, melancholy or tenderness.³² She writes that the negative aspects of sentimental works employ inflated language, *clichés* and stock metaphors.³³ Carolyn Burdett says all sentimental responses flow 'from internal human qualities'.³⁴ She writes that the positive qualities of sentiment include 'a good human heart, capable of being moved by the distresses of others'.³⁵ In her paper, Burdett considers how art, both in paintings and literature, evokes a physical reaction that might include changes in blood pressure or hormonal changes that trigger emotional responses in the brain, whether positive or negative.³⁶ The Victorians were beginning to explore and understand these responses.³⁷ Holman Hunt and Swinburne may have known of this research. *The Dovecot* and *Benediction* both place sentimentality within a religious context, although this is more obvious in Swinburne's roundel. Holman Hunt uses the doves sheltering from the storm to arouse sentimental feelings for the patience and distress of the birds sitting out the storm as a symbol of the faithful waiting for the effects of the Reformation to pass. Swinburne sets out that his roundel is a religious blessing by the title. His reference to young birds and flowers, and softness of touch, elicits a sentimental response in the reader that draws them into the parents' sorrow. As talented individuals, Holman Hunt and Swinburne understood how to create a sentimental response from their audiences.

³² Marcia Mueller Eaton, 'Laughing at the Death of Little Nell: Sentimental Art and Sentimental People', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 26 (1989), 269-282 <www.jstor.org/stable/20014296> [22 February 2022], p. 271.

³³ Eaton, p. 273.

³⁴ Carolyn Burdett, 'Is Empathy the End of Sentimentality?' *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 16 (2011), 259-274 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13555502.2011.589684>>, p. 259.

³⁵ Burdett, p. 259.

³⁶ Burdett, pp. 264-266.

³⁷ Burdett, pp. 264-266.

Both works utilise forms of allegory to help carry their meaning. In *The Dovecot*, allegory disguises what would otherwise be a controversial painting. As described earlier, the painting refers to the Tractarians' aspirations associated with Catholic and pre-Reformation practices. Many Protestants gave paintings such as *The Dovecot* a poor reception.³⁸ Indeed, several of Holman Hunt's earlier paintings with Tractarian overtones, such as *The Light of the World* (1851-2), had received hostile reviews from Protestant critics such as Thomas Carlyle.³⁹ So, it is not surprising that Holman Hunt used allegory to mask the actual narrative of the work. The lay viewer saw a painting showing doves sheltering from a storm with a landscape in the background typical of several English towns and cities. In contrast, a knowledgeable viewer observed a very different work. Swinburne uses allegory in another way. It is as if he realises that talking bluntly about young children dying is too challenging to contemplate. So the poet immediately turns death and life into a blessing and, through the title, ties his roundel to religion. He then uses the symbols of birds and flowers to build a narrative that Tucker describes as the 'inherently ritual powers of recall'.⁴⁰ *Benediction* has a brief narrative that begins and ends with the grace of a child and the blessing they give and receive. The middle section of the roundel evokes shared memories of young birds and soft flowers as symbols and links to move the narrative forward. The allegory also helps remove blame from the grieving mother by making her nurturing part of the blessing.

The intended audiences provide the critical differences between these two works. At one level, both *The Dovecot* and *Benediction* might seem to be works that would appeal to a Victorian public. The sentimentality of the work and the commonplace imagery that uses birds to provide a vital part of the allegory would appeal, as they still do, to a broad audience. Swinburne's roundel has no hidden meaning beyond its appeal on first reading. It is no less effective for this, but Swinburne is

³⁸ K. Burns, 'The Awakening Conscience: Christian Sentiment, Salvation and Spectatorship in Mid-Victorian Britain', *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 23 (2016), 1-32 <<https://doi.org/10.16995/ntn.759>>, p. 4.

³⁹ Burns, p. 4.

⁴⁰ Herbert F. Tucker, 'What Goes Around: Swinburne's A Century of Roundels', in Algernon Charles Swinburne: Unofficial Laureate, ed. by Catherine Maxwell and Stefano Evangelista (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), pp. 125-137, (p. 133).

clear about his aim of giving the roundel an appeal to his audience. When reading this work, the bereaved parent could have found solace and an outlet for their grief. Holman Hunt has, however, gone to great pains to hide the real meaning of his painting, probably to avoid criticism. Only an audience that understood the arguments put forward by the Tractarians would truly understand *The Dovecot*. It is not possible to know if this was the artist's original intent when he made the original sketch for his sister to complete. The work may have started as a simple drawing of doves but evolved into a more complex piece when he finished it himself. The creator of each piece understood their audience and crafted their works to meet their audiences' understanding and expectations.

Religion has a different place in modern British society compared to the Victorian era. Christianity is far less important in many people's lives, and it is something of a cliché to say that people who profess to be Christian often only go to church for christenings, weddings and funerals. Nevertheless, the theological debate does sometimes break into mainstream thinking, such as in the discussion of the ordination of women. However, artists or literary commentators no longer have to use symbols or allegories when commenting on a religious matter to avoid criticism. Anyone who has seen the theatre production *The Book of Mormon* will know that religion is now even fair game for satire. So it is less likely that an allegorical work like William Holman Hunt's *The Festival of St Swithin* (*The Dovecot*) would appear today. The memory of the Tractarians and what they stood for has little relevance now, and *The Dovecot* is now primarily seen as a sentimental, albeit famous, Victorian painting about doves sheltering from a storm.

People in modern Britain are somewhat insulated from death as most occur in hospitals. The Covid pandemic has led to a broader consideration of death than British society typically considers. Still, the death of a child remains an incredibly traumatic event for the parents and family for people of any faith or no faith. The pain is just as severe for the death of adult children as it is for young children. Even though sentimental art, poetry and prose are much less fashionable than in the Victorian era, grieving parents still cling to sentimental imagery and words when considering

the death of a child. Condolence cards often contain sentimental verses. Sentimentality appears at funerals where wreaths in the shape of toys or other items valued by the child are seen, or in words parents speak or write in memory of their child. The same is seen in little domestic shrines found in people's homes in memory of a child. Algernon Charles Swinburne's roundel *Benediction* has a timeless quality that has relevance today and deserves to be better known. Holman Hunt and Swinburne created works that have a lot in common, even though they have different meanings. As sentimental pieces, both have relevance in the modern world and can still appeal to a broad audience, which would undoubtedly be gratifying to their creators.

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